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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine whether a particular definition or definitions of reading comprehension were widely held by teachers at the elementary and secondary school levels. One hundred forty-seven teachers responded to a questionnaire ranking eight definitions of reading comprehension from most agreeable to least agreeable. The definitions represented on the questionnaire were: (1) Kenneth Goodman's psycholinguistic model, (2) Wayne Otto's skills approach model, (3) M. C. Wittrock's generative model, (4) Phillip Gough's information processing model, (5) George Miller's chunking model, (6) Jack Holmes's substrata factor model, (7) Russell Stauffer's intellectual functions model, and (8) Robert Ruddell's communication model. Both elementary and secondary school teachers showed a distinct pattern of stated preference for definitions of reading comprehension. The most often chosen definitions represented Stauffer's intellectual functions model and Holmes's substrata factor model--models similar in that they equate reading to an intellectual process akin to thinking. The least chosen definitions represented Miller's chunking model and Otto's skills approach model--models similar in that they represent an isolated skills approach to reading comprehension. The findings are in conflict with observed classroom teaching behavior. (Author/FL)

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Current Research and Analysis of Definitions of Comprehension

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Current Research and Analysis of Definitions of Comprehension

The subject of comprehension is one which is generating considerable attention in the field of reading. The first annual meeting of the American Reading Conference was devoted entirely to the consideration of comprehension, both process and product; the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois has produced a large body of literature centered around the study of comprehension; and, the Annual Summary of Investigations Relating to Reading (1980) reports numerous studies conducted by individuals on various aspects of comprehension.

In her report of a recent observational study, Durkin (1979) began by commenting on her inability to locate an adequate definition of comprehension instruction. Because of this lack of a definition, she constructed one upon which she based her research. Based on her definition, Durkin concluded that: 1. practically no comprehension instruction was done in classrooms and that comprehension assessment was the predominant activity; 2. that teachers neglected comprehension because they were too busy teaching phonics, structural analysis or word meanings, and; 3. that teachers were assignment givers and checkers.

Hodges (1980) has taken issue with Durkin's definition of comprehension instruction as well as with the way she operationalizes it for categorizing teacher behavior. Hodges agrees that the definition should be limited, but states that it must be broader than that created by Durkin (1979).

Operational definitions of comprehension instruction are based on theoretical definitions of reading comprehension. A variety of theoretical definitions exist that represent diverse schools of thought. The purpose of this

study was to determine whether a particular definition or definitions of reading comprehension were widely held by teachers at the elementary and secondary school levels. Additional research, to be reported later, will examine the correlation between teachers' stated beliefs about reading comprehension and their observed teaching practices.

Procedures

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 101 elementary school teachers (grades 1-5) and 46 secondary school teachers (grades 6-12). These teachers were employed in schools that can be categorized as rural, suburban, urban and inner-city.

Instrument

The questionnaire utilized in the study consisted of eight definitions of reading comprehension. Each definition represented a specific and identifiable school of thought. These eight definitions were randomly ordered on the questionnaire and brief instructions were given asking for a ranking with one representing the definition with which there was most agreement and eight representing the definition with which there was least agreement. The author and school of thought were not included.

Definitions and the schools of thought they represent are:

1. Kenneth Goodman - psycholinguistic model

   Reading comprehension is a selective process. It involves interaction between language and thought that uses the most productive cues to produce guesses which are right the first time. (Singer and Ruddell, 1970)

2. Wayne Otto -skills approach model

   Reading comprehension consists of separately distinguishable comprehension skills which can be taught in the classroom. (Otto, 1977)

3. M. C. Wittrock - generative model

   Reading comprehension is when the reader generates from memory one or more representations of an event consistent with the words of the sentence. (Wittrock, 1975)

4. Phillip Gough - information processing model

   Reading comprehension is a precise processing of information. It involves exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spelling patterns and large language units. (Singer and Ruddell, 1970)

5. George Miller - chunking model

   Reading comprehension consists of analyzing small semantic units into larger semantic units instead of vice-versa. (Singer and Ruddell, 1970)

6. Jack Holmes - substrata factor model

   Reading comprehension is a reasoning process in which various thinking skills interact in a hierachical pattern. (Singer and Ruddell, 1970)

7. Russell Stauffer - intellectual functions model

   Reading comprehension is an intellectual process much akin to thinking and therefore represents a way of making predications based on evidence presented. (Singer and Ruddell, 1970)

8. Robert Ruddell - communication model

   Reading comprehension is the same as language comprehension. (Singer and Ruddell, 1970)

Method

Questionnaires were distributed to members of six graduate reading classes at North Texas State University. These teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and to have additional teachers in their schools complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was also distributed randomly throughout one local metroplex school district. One hundred forty-seven usable questionnaires were returned.

The definitions were then rank ordered and percentages of responses calculated.

Results

Responses of the 101 elementary teachers were tallied. Perusal of Table 1 reveals that there was only one definition (#5) that received no first place ranking. Definition #8 received the greatest number of "least agreement" rankings. The results were widely distributed across rankings and definitions.

Insert Table 1 about here

Responses of the 46 secondary teachers were tallied. Perusal of Table 2 reveals that there were two definitions (#2 and #5) that received no first place rankings. Definition #5 also received no second place rankings. Definition #8 received the greatest number of "least agreement" rankings. Definition #7 received no "least agreement" rankings. The results were widely distributed across rankings and definitions.

Insert Table 2 about here

Responses of the 147 teacners were jointly tallied. Perusal of Table 3 reveals that there was one definition (#5) that received no first place ranking. Definition #8 received the greatest number of "least agreement" rankings. The results were widely distributed across rankings and definitions.

Insert Table 3 about here

Rank orders and percentages of definitions were determined for specific categories within the sample. Table 4 reports this data.

Insert Table 4 about here

The responses of elementary teachers were rank ordered by first choice; first and second choice combined; and first through fourth choices combined. Definition #6 ranked first in all three categories. Definition #4 ranked second in total ranking, while definition #7 ranked second in the combination of choices. Definition #5 ranked last in all three categories.

The responses of secondary teachers were rank ordered by first choice; first and second choice combined; and first through fourth choices combined. Definition #7 ranked first in all three categories. Definition #6 ranked second in all three categories. Definition #5 ranked last in all three categories.

The responses of all teachers were rank ordered by first choice; first and second choice combined and first through fourth choices combined. Definition #6 ranked first in total ranking. Definition #7 ranked first in both combination rankings. Definition #7 ranked second in total ranking while definition #6 ranked second in both combined rankings. Definition #5 ranked last in all three categories.

Definitions #6 and #7 were ranked first or second in eight of the nine categories. Definitions #2 and #8 were ranked sixth or seventh in all nine categories. Definition #5 was ranked eighth (last) in all nine categories.

Percentages of choice are reported in Table 4. Definition #6 was ranked first by 28% of the elementary teachers, 28% of the secondary teachers, and 28% of all teachers. Definition #6 was a first or second choice of 51% of the elementary teachers, 46% of the secondary teachers, and 49% of all teachers. Definition #6 was one of the first four choices of 80% of the elementary teachers, 74% of the secondary teachers, and 78% of all teachers.

Definition #7 was ranked first by 20% of the elementary teachers, 35% of the secondary teachers, and 25% of all teachers. Definition #7 was a first or second choice of 50% of the elementary teachers, 70% of the secondary teachers, and 56% of all teachers. Definition #7 was one of the first four choices of 80% of the elementary teachers, 89% of the secondary teachers and 82% of all teachers.

There is a distinct and discernible pattern of stated preference for definitions of reading comprehension. This pattern is supported by both rank order choices and percentage of teachers choosing each definition. This pattern holds constant across all nine categories.

Discussion

It is obvious that patterns of stated preferences for theoretical definitions of reading comprehension exist. These patterns are similar for elementary and secondary teachers, and so would seem to be representative of teachers in general.

The most often chosen two definitions represent Stauffer's intellectual functions model and Holmes' substrata factor model. These definitions are similiar in that they equate or compare reading to an intellectual or reasoning process much akin to thinking. If one's operational definition were to follow from one's theoretical definition, it would seem that the majority of teachers would be conducting their reading classrooms in a thinking mode with a high priority placed on prediction.

The least chosen two definitions represent Miller's chunking model and Otto's skills approach model. These definitions are also similar in that they seem to represent an isolated skills approach to reading comprehension. If one's operational definition were to follow from one's theoretical definition, it would seem that the majority of teachers would avoid isolated

skills as well as the process of working with small parts of language rather than ideas.

The pertinent question seems to be whether, in fact, one's operational definition derives from one's theoretical definition. Research (Durkin, 1979; Kurth and Greenlaw, 1980) seems to disprove this. Durkin reported that an unusual amount of time was devoted to assignment giving and checking and little time to development of comprehension. This behavior would not seem to represent a belief in definitions #6 or #7. Kurth and Greenlaw reported that the majority of time (35%) in formal reading instruction was spent on phonics and structural analysis skills. This was true as an average percentage of grades K, 2, 4, and 6. Very little discussion or interaction from child to child occurred in the classes that were observed. This behavior does not seem to represent a belief in a thinking, intellectual mode of reading instruction.

Why are teachers behaving in a manner that seems to reflect the philosophies they rank as least agreeable? One reason might be that, though teachers want to think of themselves as developing thinking skills, this method requires constant attention, flexibility and planning. Each group and individuals within the group will respond differently, and time is a necessary ingredient. It is much easier and faster to whip through a set pattern determined by the editors of a basal program. Being human, teachers have lofty ideals, but fall prey to the daily grind.

A second possibility is that, though teachers believe in teaching thinking skills, the majority of reading achievement and competency tests seem to test isolated skills. A concern for test-taking appears to rule teaching behavior.

Whatever the cause for this bi-polar behavior, it would seem reasonable to suggest that teachers closely inspect their stated beliefs in reading comprehension, determine schemes for implementing their beliefs, and teach in a manner that is consistent with their beliefs.

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TABLE 1

Rank Order Tally of Definitions by Elementary Teachers

Rank	Definitions							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	5	3	18	23	0	23	21	3
2	11	5	13	9	3	23	29	8
3	18	5	15	14	8	19	18	4
4	17	12	24	10	9	10	12	7
5	16	23	10	11	16	8	9	8
6	12	18	10	13	23	7	5	13
7	9	15	5	12	30	5	5	20
8	13	20	6	9	12	1	2	38

n = 101

TABLE 2

Rank Order Tally of Definitions by Secondary Teachers

Rank	Definitions							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	7	0	4	4	0	13	16	2
2	10	1	5	5	0	8	16	1
3	7	3	8	8	4	8	5	3
4	8	2	13	7	3	5	4	4
5	6	9	5	6	13	5	1	1
6	2	10	4	7	10	3	2	8
7	4	13	4	1	12	2	2	8
8	2	8	3	8	4	2	0	19

n = 46

TABLE 3

Rank Order Tally of Definitions of All Teachers

Rank	Definitions							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	12	3	22	27	0	41	37	5
2	21	6	18	14	3	31	45	9
3	25	8	23	22	12	27	23	7
4	25	14	37	17	12	15	16	11
5	22	32	15	17	29	13	10	9
6	14	28	14	20	33	10	7	21
7	13	28	9	13	42	7	7	28
8	15	28	9	17	16	3	2	57

n = 147

TABLE 4

Rank Order of Definitions and Percentage of Choice by Designated Categories by Elementary, Secondary and All Teachers

	Elementary			Secondary			Total		
Rank	Total	1st to 2nd Choices	1st to 4th Choices	Total	1st & 2nd Choices	1st to 4th Choices	Total	1st & 2nd Choices	1st to 4th Choices
1	6 (28%)	6 (51%)	6 (80%)	7 (35%)	7 (70%)	7 (89%)	6 (28%)	7 (56%)	7 (82%)
2	4 (23%)	7 (50%)	7 (80%)	6 (28%)	6 (46%)	6 (46%)	7 (25%)	6 (49%)	6 (78%)
3	7 (20%)	4 (32%)	3 (70%)	1 (15%)	1 (37%)	1 (70%)	4 (19%)	4 (28%)	3 (68%)
4	3 (18%)	3 (31%)	4 (56%)	3 (9%)	3 (20%)	3 (65%)	3 (15%)	3 (27%)	4 (54%)
5	1 (5%)	1 (16%)	1 (51%)	4 (9%)	4 (20%)	4 (52%)	1 (8%)	1 (22%)	1 (56%)
6	2 (3%)	8 (11%)	2 (25%)	8 (4%)	8 (7%)	8 (22%)	8 (3%)	8 (10%)	8 (22%)
7	8 (3%)	2 (8%)	8 (22%)	2 (0%)	2 (2%)	2 (15%)	2 (2%)	2 (6%)	2 (21%)
8	5 (0%)	5 (3%)	5 (20%)	5 (0%)	5 (0%)	5 (13%)	5 (0%)	5 (2%)	5 (18%)